

**In the wake of her shock decision to close her hugely successful I Quit Sugar empire, Sarah Wilson reveals why she made the “insane” choice to do so, how motherhood could be on the cards – and why life is sweeter than ever**

Photography GEORGES ANTONI Styling NICOLE BONYTHON-HINES Interview JORDAN BAKER

# The sweet escape

When Sarah Wilson was on the cusp of her teens, she spent a year wearing a patch to correct a lazy eye. This social humiliation, on top of her rag-bag clothes and the guilelessness that came from growing up in a dusty hut in the bush outside Canberra, made her easy pickings for the mean girls at school. “I was bagged out for being too skinny, and having a monobrow and knobby knees,” Wilson says. To cope, she hung out in the school library and cultivated “an aloofness. I very much had a thing in my head that said, ‘I am going to do things differently.’”

And she did. She studied chemical engineering, then dabbled in quantum physics and German existentialism before setting the world record for the biggest-ever bikini photo shoot as editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She fronted *MasterChef* as the show’s first (and only) host. She wrote a raw, confessional book about her crippling anxiety and manic depression. She quit sugar. And, despite her various career successes, she still doesn’t own a house, or a car, or more than a suitcase of clothes. Although Wilson’s less-travelled path has inspired thousands of acolytes, there are also some who, like those mean girls at high school, find her ideas obsessive, or extreme, or weird.

This year, Wilson made a decision that wasn’t just different – it was subversive. She decided to close the multimillion dollar I Quit Sugar business she founded five years ago, rather than sell it to someone whose values might not align with hers. Many were baffled by her financial harakiri. “Money doesn’t matter to me,” Wilson tells *Stellar*. “I am aware that nobody else does it this way – that it seems insane. But I’ve always wanted to challenge the capitalist model.”

She didn’t shun the system completely. She invested enough of the money she earned over those years to fulfil her sole financial goal – saving enough that, if she was

unable to work, she could support her modest lifestyle until she was 94. That goal now achieved, Wilson, 44, is currently looking forward to living life on her own terms, with passion projects, travel – and maybe even motherhood.

WILSON AND HER five younger siblings grew up in the bush outside Canberra on what her father described as a “semi self-sufficient property”. They kept goats for milk and meat, bought old bread from the Tip Top factory and wore clothes that had been earmarked for mechanics’ rags. They weren’t hippies, she says; they were poor.

She might not be a capitalist, but she is certainly a born entrepreneur. At 11, she packed plants at a nursery. At 12, she made and sold dolls’ house furniture. At 13, she created a line of library bags from calico. And at 15, having been talent-spotted by a bra fitter at a department store, she began modelling. Emma Macdonald, another Canberra model-turned-journalist, remembers Wilson as naïve, whip-smart and already financially self-sufficient. “She didn’t have a model kit or any make-up,” Macdonald says. “She was coming to castings in jeans. She wandered in from this rural property, she was tall and gangly and beautiful, but a little bit clueless as to how it all went.”

Wilson has had an eclectic career, including as the short-lived host of *MasterChef*’s first season in 2009 after leaving *Cosmopolitan*. “I felt very constricted in my role,” she now admits. “I almost turned inside out with creative boredom, to be honest. By the time I quit, the show was a hit, and those around me thought I was mad, but it was not the right thing for me to continue doing. The sense of diving into the unknown of quitting the show, though, definitely propelled me.”

But not before a spectacular crash and burn: by her late 30s, she was living in an army shed in the Byron Bay hinterland after a physical and mental breakdown. Yet her most successful venture was born out of the ashes. I Quit Sugar began as a newspaper column, then became an e-book that Wilson wrote and published herself. As people sought her out for advice, it blossomed into a full-blown business, offering cookbooks and ▶

**SARAH WEARS**  
(opposite) Bianca Spender dress, [biancaspender.com](http://biancaspender.com); Stuart Weitzman boots, [hermanns.com.au](http://hermanns.com.au)

eight-week eating programs promising to wean its followers off the so-called white poison.

Not everyone has embraced Wilson's philosophy. "An eight-week plan where you are told to cut out sugar and certain foods perpetuates a fear of food and a dieting mentality," says Dr Nick Fuller, Boden Institute academic and founder of Interval Weight Loss. "Sugar-free is confusing and not based on scientific evidence - some foods contain naturally occurring sugars which are good for our health." For her part, Wilson says her program focuses on cutting fructose, the most harmful sugar, and has a message of abundant eating. And in any event, she points out, she is not thrusting her approach down anyone's throat. "It's called I Quit Sugar, not You Must Quit Sugar. I have created products when people asked for them."

Business boomed, with 20 employees, supermarket products and plans to expand overseas. And then, in February this year, Wilson pulled the plug. She didn't want to "keep doing that scale, scale, scale, sell, sell, sell". She tried to sell the business but couldn't find a buyer she could trust. "My noggin is all over packaging and books. I would find it



**SARAH WEARS**  
Hellessy top,  
net-a-porter.com, Pop  
Shop Sydney popsicle,  
popshopsydney.com

## "I've a responsibility now not to be the sad person who just wants more"

very difficult to sit back and watch somebody take my brand and face and do all kinds of things that I don't agree with."

So rather than sell, she shut. Immediately, there were accusations the business was failing, or she was jumping off the sugar ship before it sank. Not so, says Wilson. "The business got to a point where it had gone from being a joy - creating, inventing, connecting with people - to a business concern. It felt soul-destroying. It felt wrong."

It wasn't an easy process. She had to disappoint her loyal online community ("I live quite a lonely life, and they've been my family in many ways") and make staff redundant, which was "a horrible thing to have to do. I gave them a generous redundancy and told them to go to find work immediately. I wrote up a letter to explain what happened to future employers."

It's not quite the end of the road for I Quit Sugar. Since she announced its closure, Wilson has been asked to sell off sections of the business, such as its content, or its technology. Any money will go to an as-yet unspecified charity. Many were surprised at her decision. But not her old friend Macdonald. "While she has a strong entrepreneurial spirit, it's for independence and spirit, it's not for gross commercial gain," she says. "She is worth squillions, but she doesn't care. She is motivated by travel and experience and contributing to the world."

In her mid-30s, Wilson was told she was infertile. The news was followed by a bigger health crisis; her anxiety flared and she was diagnosed with a sluggish thyroid, which was causing her to pile on weight, lose hair and feel constantly exhausted. She fled the big lights of Sydney for that Byron Bay hinterland hut, where she stayed focused on her physical and mental recovery.

In 2016, Wilson learnt that infertility diagnosis from eight years earlier had been wrong. She had a partner when she heard the news, and they quickly became pregnant. But Wilson miscarried at 10 weeks, and the relationship didn't survive the grief.

Now, at age 44, Wilson has been trying again. She has twice tried artificial insemination with donor sperm - both attempts have resulted in pregnancies, but each time she miscarried, most recently in February. Donor sperm is hard to come by in Australia, so one of her attempts was overseas. Still, Wilson feels compelled to try. "[Trying to become pregnant] is a very big journey," she says. "It probably won't happen, but there's a chance, so I have to explore and see what I can make of it. To be given a chance at the 11th hour - what



### QUITTING TO WIN

(clockwise from left) Sarah Wilson hosting *MasterChef Australia*, here with contestant Julie Goodwin, in 2009; with Face of Miss Shop winner Amy Fromm during her mid-2000s stint editing *Cosmopolitan*; Wilson started what would become *I Quit Sugar* in 2011 and launched her bestseller a year later.

do you do? There's a three to five per cent chance for someone my age."

If artificial insemination fails, Wilson will not try IVF, or use a donor egg. "I kind of feel that if my body is meant to hold a baby, it will do it on its own. If it's not, I trust the flow of life - I am meant to do something else." She has lifelong financial security. "It's unbelievable [to have that]," she says. "I had years in the wilderness of going, 'What the hell is going to happen?' Having bipolar, you just don't know. I have a responsibility now I have this security not to be the sad person who just wants more, more, more, more. That's a recipe for misery."

I Quit Sugar might be over, but the books will keep coming - she is

## "If my body is meant to hold a baby, it will do it. If it's not, I trust the flow of life"

presently working on a no-waste cookbook. More importantly, though, she is comfortable with her anxiety. For years, she struggled with the "chundering thoughts" that began in her early teens and have continued to swirl, at sometimes intolerable volumes, ever since. In her 2017 book, *First We Make The Beast Beautiful*, she wrote about her experience with anxiety, manic depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

"The book is the best thing I have ever done because I understand myself," she explains. "There's nothing like

writing a book about something you find challenging to make sure you rise to it.

"Now I find it a wonderful asset that I have these moments of insight and clarity, and the ability to churn out a huge amount of work at a rapid rate. I used to find it frightening. Now I understand it. After years of feeling like a freak, completely lost in it, totally self-doubting and also scared of how scared I make other people, I can now sit comfortably and go, 'It's cool, it happens for a reason.'" ★

**SARAH WEARS**  
Scanlan Theodore  
dress, scanlan  
theodore.com

OTHER PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBIN AMADIO, DON ARNOLD/WIREIMAGE, NETWORK TEN. HAIR: DAREN BORTHWICK USING ORIBE. MAKE-UP: LINDA JEFFERVES USING L'OREAL LIPLIPS